

Prayer

Deliver us, O Lord, from everything that clouds our understanding of You. We know we cannot see you in Your glory and Your majesty until the end of time; but may we never be satisfied until we have explored every means to know You more and know You better. Give us a thirst for You and for Your will that is never quenched until we see You in glory either on this earth or in the heavens. We praise You, Glorious Lord. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Hope

Many people find it hard to understand where the world is heading today. Pray that God's people will use this opportunity to preach the Gospel, which is God's hope for the world.

On-going prayers

- Pray for those who do not know how to face life
- Pray for victims of rape, and for justice for the abused
- Give thanks for the gift of time and a weekend to use it!

Meditation

Let us allow the Lord to change us for the better;
Let us yield everything to Him and be His servants.
Let us repent before Him of every unworthy thought;
Let us deal with the issues that divide us without delay;
Let us forgive those who have hurt us unconditionally;
Let us give Satan no opportunity to control our feelings.
Let us listen to each other and abandon all selfishness;
Let us accept that Christ loves us showing no partiality;
Let us put love into action as we face life's challenges;
Let us find peace where the world cannot see it, in You.
Let us be happy in our faith and radiate the Spirit's joy!
Let us rejoice that He is coming again, for He is!

Bible Study - Malachi 3:6-12

⁶ For I the LORD do not change; and you, O children of Jacob, have not perished.
⁷ Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of Hosts. But you say, 'How are we to return?' ⁸ Will anyone cheat God? Yet you are cheating me! But you say, 'How are we cheating you?' In your tithes and offerings! ⁹ You are accursed! It is me you are cheating, the whole of this nation! ¹⁰ Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house. Put me to the test by doing this, says the LORD of Hosts, and see if I will not open up for you the windows of heaven and pour down blessings upon you until there is nothing left! ¹¹ For you, I will stop pests destroying the fruits of your soil; and your vine in the field will not be fruitless, says the LORD

of Hosts. ¹² Then all nations will consider you blessed, for you will be a delightful land, says the LORD of hosts.

Review

This is one of the well known parts of the prophecy of Malachi. Verses 8 to 10 have become known in recent years because they speak about the importance of tithing, and they also identify the relationship between being obedient to God and receiving His blessings. These are important issues, but they are only the beginning of what the Lord can say to His people through this passage. Malachi also tells us about the unchanging character of God, the cost of repentance, the relationship between curse and blessing, and the nature of God's blessings both for individuals and for the community of His people. In addition, the whole passage is part of a broader theme in Malachi about the cleansing of the people before the Lord's coming, as we saw in the previous study (3:1-5). What we have read today is not just a teaching about tithing; it is part of Malachi's broad understanding of what happens when God's people become disillusioned and let go of the disciplines of faith.

At the very beginning of our passage, we read the words 'I the Lord do not change ...', which is a powerful confirmation of a basic characteristic of God. However, what comes next is a little surprising. It is often said that the God of the Old Testament is a God of judgement, but this passage reminds us that He is also a God of Salvation from the beginning of the Bible to the end. The people of Israel had neglected God and had acted in bad faith towards Him (1:6f.), but despite this they had 'not perished' (1:6). The Lord had not condemned them completely; He wanted them to 'return' to Him and He would return to them (1:7). This sounds simple, but history speaks of how hard people find it to do, and we still find it hard today even though we have the assurance of forgiveness through Christ.

The central section of our passage reminds God's people that they are under discipline, and just as they owed God the proper animal sacrifices in worship (1:6-14) they also owed the Lord the proper tithes. It is likely that because they were poor, the people felt they did not have enough to bring a full tithe to the Temple just as they did not bring 'perfect' animals for sacrifice (1:6-14). God, however, said that by holding back the tithe they were cheating Him (3:9). Some Bibles say they 'robbed' God, but the idea in the Hebrew text (see notes on translation below) is that by not bringing the tithe the people were avoiding God as well as not giving Him His due. Now, if they were avoiding God, did this mean that the people felt guilty because they knew that they were doing wrong? It seems likely!

God's call to His people was clear and direct; 'bring the whole tithe into the storehouse' (3:10). His graciousness can be seen however in the promise He gave should the people do what they knew they should. He said that if they completed their obligation in respect of tithes, then He would give them so many blessings that heaven would have no more to offer! The blessing God promised was, of course, to break the cycle of poverty in which the people were trapped. They had little and therefore gave inadequately, but if they gave the full due, then as verse 11 says, God would act to remove the pestilence and disease from their crops and give them a higher yield.

This passage explains that God's blessings are not things like 'spiritual gifts' or material goods; God was not responding to prayer requests for 'things' people wanted! The fullest blessing of heaven was that God would enable His people to be seen as blessed by others (3:12); and therefore fulfil their basic Covenant calling (see Genesis 12:2,3) to be a witness to the world!. So when we fulfil the obligations placed on us by God, then we can expect to be able to fulfil the calling God has placed on us today to be His witnesses.

Going Deeper

- Pray for all who struggle to meet what they know are their obligations to the Lord and feel guilty about it. Ask the Lord to help such people take the simple steps necessary to begin to put right what is wrong, and so receive God's blessings.

Final Prayer

Glorious Lord, the truth of Your Gospel is amazing, for we have been touched by it and know it is true, and yet it presents us with a powerful challenge. Give us the courage to follow where it leads with all truthfulness and grace, and help us to value the guidance it gives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord; AMEN

one tenth. Indeed, if you read my recent study on 1 Corinthians 16:2, you will realise that the dominant theme of giving in the New Testament is not that of tithe, but of give 'all' and only keeping for oneself the minimum necessary to sustain normal life. It is my opinion that in advising Christians about how to give money, whilst 'one tenth' is a useful starting point in guiding people about how to apportion money received, this is only one part of a much wider issue, which is how to ensure that we give 'everything' to God. In these 'New Testament' times, if we think that one tenth meets our obligations, then we are wrong. Malachi's implicit call for 'higher standards' of giving and worship amongst God's purified people suggests that the New Testament is the right place for us to look for guidance about how to use our resources. A legalistic approach to giving can be a part of our life and worship, but we should be wary that people sometimes use it to avoid God rather than engage with Him.

When it comes to blessings, we must remember that Malachi prophesied before the time of Christ. I boldly suggest that he was not simply suggesting that if God's people paid tithes then they would be blessed. I think that he was saying more than this. He was indicating a direct connection between us giving our best, and God giving everything in return; remember that the text says that God will give everything He is able to give from heaven! Indeed, this has surely now been done, and God has given His 'all' by sending Christ! The only right thing for us to do as a consequence, is to aspire to give our 'all' to God as well; and according to this prophecy this means that we will be able to experience such blessing that other people will see God in us (3:12)!

Giving one tenth seems to me to be but a small part of what this prophecy is about, and I find no difficulty in suggesting that Malachi was looking further into the future to the blessing of God's salvation poured out to all who believe and who respond to Him with total commitment.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In what ways does God change? In what ways does God change? What is the difference between the two?
2. Is it necessary for Christians to give one tenth of what they own to God? Is tithing necessary for all Christians, always?
3. In what ways does God bless His people today when they do His will? Speak from personal experience if possible.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The issue of tithing is complex, and I have said what I think about this passage already. We need guides such as the principle of tithing, but each one of us needs to make sure that we have a broader understanding of what the Lord requires of us today, so that we ensure that we are doing all we can to fulfil this. I find that this requires me to be vigilant and careful, and when I pray I need to check out with the Lord whether I am 'on the right tracks'. It is too easy to live according to presumption or habit, even in our relationship with the Lord.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *If you have a fellowship group of which you are a part, then try to ask people about their attitude to tithing and other obligations to God. People can often find this subject really difficult, but it is not an issue that should be avoided.*

God's intention has always been for His people to witness to Him in the world so that He can bless more and more people and overcome the evil in the world. Tithing and blessing is not a contract for our spiritual enjoyment of life! As we 'go deeper', we will find out more about the importance of honouring our obligations to God and what 'blessing' really means!

Notes on the text and translation

- V6** *'you, O children of Jacob, have not perished'* The meaning of this verse is very important, and the final word 'perished' comes from a Hebrew word meaning 'to be complete', or 'to be finished'. The whole verse has general meaning that God has not yet finished with His people!
- V8** *'will anyone rob God?'* The Hebrew word used here for 'rob' is uncertain, and it is not found anywhere else except possibly in Proverbs 22:23. There is some evidence that it could mean 'circumvent', or perhaps the idea of 'avoidance'. I have decided to use 'cheat' because it retains something of both these ideas
- V9** *'you are accursed ...'* The Hebrew is an emphatic double, reading 'with a curse you are cursed' and the strength of this curse is probably due to the fact that it comes from God.
- V10** *'until there is nothing left'* The version with which you will be most familiar is this; 'until it overflows'. However, a strict rendering of the Hebrew is 'as far as a failure of sufficient'! The general idea of abundance is quite clear, but it adds an interesting twist to the phrase to retain the idea of there being nothing left (see study).
- V11** *'I will stop pests destroying ...'* There is a strong hint that what is meant is locusts; but this is not specifically said, so I have left it vague with 'pests'.

Going Deeper

God's purpose for His people (3:6-8)

It is always good to be able to read in Scripture a plain confirmation of one of the basic beliefs about God, in this case, that He is unchangeable (3:6). We should be careful about the concept of being 'unchanging' however, because this is not the same as being 'unyielding'! What is always unchanging about God, as Paul perceived in his famous first letter to the Corinthians (chapter 13), is that He is love. God's character does not change, even if the way we perceive Him changes, His intention is always to be loving to those He has made. In addition to His unchangeable character, His plans for the world do not change. He is always working to bring the world to its final triumphant conclusion, but there may be all kinds of things that He wants to happen within this world before then, and we do not know what this might be.

Beyond God's character and His plans, it is difficult for us to be precise about any other 'unchangeable' characteristics of God, because there is so much evidence of His responding to people and engaging with us in 'changeable' ways. For example, in this text, He says 'Return to me, and I will return to You' (3:7), and the fact that the end result of this is dependent upon what people do means that God allows Himself to be responsive to events on earth. If this were not so, then our relationship with God would be little different from that with an entirely predictable computer, for example! However, it is part of God's extraordinary graciousness towards us that He engages with us and responds to our choices. Indeed, He longs for us to make the right choices and appeals to us in His love, and He has to bear the heartache of rejection when we say 'no'!

In this passage from Malachi, the 'children of Jacob' (an expression meaning 'God's people', or simply 'Israel') stand accused of continual rebellion against God (3:7), but God still stands waiting for them to fulfil their calling. In the days of Abraham He gave them a

Covenant call to be a 'blessing to all nations' (Gen 12:3 etc.) and then gave them the moral guidelines by which they could achieve this goal (see Exodus and the giving of the Law). It was a miracle of grace that God did not give up on His people despite their inability to live up to their calling. At the time Malachi wrote, it was becoming clear that in order for God's will to be done, He could not depend upon Israel, but would have to purify them and work through them in a new way. This is what the great prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel had already said, and is what Malachi also accepted (see 3:1-5).

If you read through Malachi chapter 3, you will see that verses 1 to 5 (which speak about the need for God's people to be purified) conclude with the thought that once purified, the people would be able to offer 'acceptable offerings' (3:4). It is highly likely that by writing about tithing, Malachi was giving an example of what he meant by 'acceptable offerings'. He did not simply return to the notion of bringing the Lord animal sacrifices that were unblemished and 'whole' (as in chapter 1); he spoke about tithes. Tithing was undoubtedly a part of Israelite life, but for Malachi, it represented a tougher and more demanding form of response to God; it was a sign of costly repentance.

Presenting tithes (3:8-10)

Today, we tend to think of tithes and worship as two different things, but to the people of Old Testament times, both were a part of the ancient laws that governed worship. The tithe is not mentioned a great deal in the Old Testament (Numbers 18:21f., Deuteronomy 14:22f. and 2 Chronicles 31:5f.) but largely concerns the giving of one tenth of agricultural produce to the Priests and the Temple. Some of this was reserved 'for the Lord', but most was given to the priests because they had no land and no personal source of food. Clearly, the whole Temple system of worshipping God would collapse if priests could not do their duties because they had no food! In the hard times of the fifth century BC it would have been easy for people to say 'we're poor, so we will not give our tithe', but God said that such an attitude was as much an insult to Him as failing to bring proper animal sacrifices (1:6-10).

So, to give God proper tithes was to give God proper worship in the Temple. Indeed, giving God one tenth of a crop of grain was a far more demanding requirement than finding the best animal sacrifices! This reminds us of Jesus' approach to teaching about doing things properly. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7), Jesus constantly called people to a higher standard than 'the law' required, for example, he said that not only should people not murder other people, they should not entertain anger in their hearts (Matt 5:21f.). For this reason, it is unwise for us to fix too closely on one tenth as the proper and correct amount of money or property to be given to God 'as a tithe'; we should perhaps regard Malachi's prophecy as calling God's people to aspire to the highest standards of worship and giving possible. Remember, giving and worship were one and the same to Malachi.

This is something we will look at further in the 'application' section of this study, because this passage of Scripture raises the whole issue of tithing amongst God's people today. As a matter of fact, however, where tithing is specifically mentioned in Scripture the percentage is assumed and never mentioned, as it is here. There are places in Scripture where the giving of one tenth is described (as in Abraham's offering to Melchizedek – Genesis 14:20), but it is not called a tithe! This does present us with a problem, because it seems right to assume that the tithe was one tenth. In addition to this confusion, scripture does not always describe a 'tithe' as being given automatically, or all the time. In Deuteronomy 14:28 and 26:12, for example, the tithe is described specifically as being given only one year in three, but from the third year's crop alone! It would be neat and tidy to think of the Biblical tithe as simple 'one tenth of everything', but this is simply not the case. We must accept that Malachi was more interested in God's people doing what was required of them rather than the exact details of which tithe he was talking about or whether

it meant one tenth of everything all the time, or what Moses said in Deuteronomy! In this passage, what God wanted was obedient people prepared to do what He asked, not people who felt they could escape any further obligation once they had met a certain level of giving!

Putting the Lord to the test, to receive blessing (3:10-12)

By being obedient to the Lord in the matter of giving, the people were granted the opening of the 'windows of heaven'! This is a powerful picture of God's blessing pouring down from heaven, and it has inspired many people who are in search of 'blessings from heaven'. It is of course true that God does bless those who are obedient, but this text is specific and not general. We will understand this picture or vision more accurately, if we know that in the Old Testament, the idea of a 'window' in heaven was not mere poetry. A brief look at Genesis 1 will reveal that people believed that beyond the 'dome' of the sky and under the ground on which people stood, the universe was not an expanse of 'nothing' (as science tells us nowadays), but a vast expanse of water (Gen 1:4-7)! In the minds of the ancients, therefore, rain from above came from 'openings' or 'windows' in the sky that were opened by God. In addition, because crops were entirely depended upon rain, people believed there was a clear link between God's activity in opening windows in the sky and every kind of earthly blessing. To put in bluntly, if it rained, crops grew and people lived; if it did not rain, then crops failed and people died.

No wonder therefore, that Malachi saw a direct connection between giving God the proper tithe of grain and the blessing of rain that would enable people to live without fear of famine and death! The agricultural picture is completed by the reference to God's additional blessing of destroying 'pestilence' (3:11). What God was saying was clear enough, however. He expected His people to show that they were 'purified' (3:1-5) by giving Him the honour that was His due. This would enable them to receive the kind of blessings that people of those days would have understood as being evidence of God at work. Any nation that was blessed by sufficiency and abundance would have been the envy of the world in those days. This was what the Lord invited the people to seek; because this course of action meant that they would then have fulfilled their call to demonstrate God's presence in the world.

The picture presented on Proverbs 11:24-26 is remarkably similar:

24 Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. 25 A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water. 26 The people curse those who hold back grain, but a blessing is on the head of those who sell it. (Proverbs 11:24-26)

Application

Whilst explaining this text, you may have wondered how this could possibly help us understand tithing today and the connection between tithing and blessing. Many churches teach the principle of tithing, meaning that people should give one tenth of their total income to the church (or perhaps to charity in general and some of this to the church). They naturally suggest that this should result in God's blessing of His people. Most churches will readily teach that such blessings are not material blessings according to our desire for earthly wealth, but blessing appropriate to the fulfilment of God's will through His people.

This seems admirable, and I would not wish to suggest this is wrong. However, I think it worth refining this notion a little in the light of our study. Firstly, the lack of scriptural connection between 'tithe' and 'tenth' (which has always been observed by those who study the Bible) does suggest that we are unwise to be too legalistic about the notion of